

What Do You Mean, 'Social Policy Analysis'?

Reflections on Concepts and Methodology

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1 Introduction

This article arose from discussions within the Social Policy Programme of the Institute of Development Studies funded by the Department for International Development (DFID). One aim of this programme is to develop new approaches to 'social policy analysis', with particular reference to the role of such analysis in the identification and implementation of development programmes and projects. A primary output of the Social Policy Programme is to be a manual, intended primarily for DFID, which should serve as a guide to best practice. As an initial step towards achieving this ambitious objective, this article explores some of the methods used by donor agencies to undertake 'social analysis'. The intention is to consider those activities which appear to come under this heading, and the related materials and methods that are adopted for measurement and analysis. The article is concerned with both presentation and substance, attempting to assess both the stated concerns and related prescribed procedures of donors and the extent to which those concerns and procedures play an effective role in terms of actual decision-making and action.

2 Changing Donor Attitudes in the 1990s

There has clearly been a major shift in the language adopted by donor agencies in the 1990s. The 1980s' emphasis on the abject failure of governments and the pursuit of market solutions has been considerably moderated. Both markets and government interventions in markets are now generally recognised as having 'strengths and limits'. There is once again an attempt to define a role, though a more limited role than in the post-colonial period, for government in the provision of services – including education, health and social security – where markets are seen as either failing to deliver or giving rise to major equity concerns. This has led to an emphasis on 'good governance', with a particular focus on the need for institutions that can effectively implement 'good' policies (World Bank 1997).

There has also been a rapid growth in what might be seen as attempts to supplement, or in some cases by-pass, relatively ineffective public institutions. Donors are increasingly cofunding, and in

Table 1: DAC core indicators 1998

Economic well-being
● Reduce extreme poverty by half
Social development
● Universal primary education
● Eliminate gender disparity in education (2005)
● Reduce infant and child mortality by two-thirds
● Reduce maternal mortality by three-fourths
● Universal access to reproductive health services
Environmental sustainability and regeneration
● Implementation of a national strategy for sustainable development in every country by 2005; so as to reverse trends in the loss of environmental resources by 2015
Qualitative factors
● Participatory development
● Democratisation
● Good governance
● Human rights

Source: OECD/DAC 1998

practice comanaging, social services in low income countries, setting up various forms of 'partnership' agreement with governments. There has been a dramatic growth in the employment of donor funded and comanaged 'social funds', which are intended to provide financial support in response to 'community demand' for infrastructure or services, with project implementation often undertaken by NGOs or private firms. Increasingly, both international and national NGOs are being used by donors for service delivery in poor communities or to poor households (Girishankar 1999; Howell 2000).

It is frequently suggested that there has also been a fundamental reassessment of the aims of donors in recent years. At least since the 1970s, donor 'goals' have usually been stated in terms which gave priority to poverty reduction and recognised, at least in principle, that development was not synonymous with per capita income growth. However, it is now claimed that this position is being taken much more seriously. The 1998 agreement on Core Indicators for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC 1998), which demoted

GNP per capita to the status of 'other selected indicators of development', is often quoted in support of this position, given its apparent concern with poverty, gender, social development, environment and the 'qualitative factors' of participation, democratisation, governance and rights.

The mid to late 1990s have also witnessed the apparent rise of 'social development issues'. Terms such as participation, gender-sensitivity, empowerment, voice, ownership, social exclusion and social capital have become common currency, in some cases to the extent that they have lost much of their original value. Shortly after the appointment of President Wolfenson, the World Bank established a 'Social Development Task Force'. A policy statement on participation appeared in 1994 and a 'Participation Sourcebook' in 1995. The sourcebook included an early discussion within the Bank of the value of 'stakeholder analysis' which has become one of the principle new social development tools, and also embraced the concept of 'social capital'. More recently, there was active discussion within the Bank on the need to directly support poor community groups and organisations and 'take into account the institutional context which encourages or represses them' (Fox 1997: 965). An essential ingredient of every new project or programme appraisal within the UK DFID is a 'social assessment', which uses the methods of 'social and cultural anthropology, sociology, human geography and political science' and is designed to 'underpin a people-centred approach to sustainable development' (Eyben 1998: 3, 1).

In addition to the concern with social issues within projects in general, there has also been a major shift to projects directly focusing on key areas of social policy, including education, health and varieties of social security system at the local level. In the relatively recent past, donor expenditures were typically dominated by large scale capital projects such as roads, dams and power generation. Isolated projects have also very much fallen out of favour and been replaced by a variety of 'programme' funding approaches, including 'sector wide approaches' (SWAPs) and social action funds (SAFs).

There will be no attempt here to discuss the rationale for such changes in donor strategies or the relative effectiveness of the various approaches,

though it seems clear that the debate is still very much open (e.g. Ratcliffe and Macrae 1999; Tendler 1999). The aim is to draw attention to the associated information requirements, in terms of project and programme appraisal, monitoring and evaluation, and to point out that the combination of changes outlined above raises severe methodological challenges which are surprisingly seldom addressed. Thus, for example, the cost of establishing reasonably reliable information systems to monitor the implementation of a large scale capital project will typically represent a tiny proportion of the overall cost of that project. Achieving a similar level of reliability for, say, a programme of activities designed to provide access to basic health care for poor households through budgetary support to primary services at district level, might well imply costs which would exceed that for all other activities. Targeting such households and monitoring their morbidity and health care seeking behaviour, the quality of services they obtain from a wide variety of providers and their associated expenditures in terms of both cash and time would be a formidable undertaking. In practice, it will not be seriously attempted. Whatever claims may be made at the design phase of such programmes, the reality will usually be that minimal systems are put in place with the aim of ensuring the donors' primary requirement for financial probity, and effectiveness will be judged on a range of crude proxy indicators such as facility utilisation and simplistic measures of client satisfaction.

In many areas of social policy a wide gap has opened up between the realistic possibilities for information gathering, analysis and interpretation and the 'virtual reality' of stipulated monitoring and evaluation procedures as identified in project and programme documents. This virtual reality postulates a situation in which donors, government agencies and possibly community organisations have a much greater capacity to generate, manage and use information than is in fact the case. There is a considerable dilemma for donors in having to accept either that otherwise attractive programmes should be abandoned simply because they are likely to prove impossible to monitor effectively, or that they have to accept, and justify, a substantially lower level of accountability in terms of assessing the effective use of the resources provided. Such an acceptance would clearly run counter to the trend

towards greater accountability which had its origins in the market-oriented 1980s but which has been pursued with undiminished vigour in the 1990s. This trend is perhaps best reflected in the logical frame approach (LFA) which has now become an unavoidable adjunct to the design of projects, programmes and, more recently, NGO activities and academic research on development.

3 The Logical Frame and Social Development

The 1990s saw the fall of the last remaining agency to resist the onward march of the LFA. SIDA eventually gave way in 1993 under pressure from the Swedish government to adopt a management-by-objectives approach. This mirrored the move to LFA by DFID in the mid 1980s, their evaluation department having provided a series of eloquent arguments for non-adoption at a 1983 workshop (Cracknell 1984). As indicated above, the 1980s saw the widespread introduction of performance indicators in the public sector, not least in government departments concerned with aid. The logical framework should not simply be seen as a mechanism whereby donors monitor project and programme cost-effectiveness. The associated objectively verifiable indicators (OVIs) are also required to justify donor expenditures and hence argue for level or expanded budget allocations in future years.

Donor agencies are often seen by their clients as all powerful institutions with unlimited financial resources. In practice they also routinely have to justify their aims and activities to their funders, be these government finance ministries, boards of governors or parliamentary committees, many of whose members may be resistant to, or completely unaware of, the shifting preoccupations of the development community. And *those* funders are clearly very hard to impress. The 1990s may have been an exciting period in terms of development theories and concepts but in terms of financial support there was little relief from the declines of the 1980s. All major donors reduced aid relative to their GNP between 1991 and 1997 (World Bank 1998), and total DAC aid declined by one-third. Indeed, given the continuing pressure on aid funding and assuming that the current rhetoric is genuine, it would seem that some donors may be adopting a

potentially high risk strategy in terms of their own constituency. If, for example, the conceptual shift to the language of civil society organisations and partnership and the practical shift to social funds were really to allow other actors to have a substantial influence on the aid agenda, this would appear to make the attainment of donor agency performance objectives much less certain.

Are the trends towards both a greater emphasis on social development and a higher level of accountability in conflict? Some would prefer to say that it raises interesting new questions as to the meaning of 'accountability' (Cornwall *et al.* 2000). Gasper (1997: 20) suggests that social development staff in DFID (then the Overseas Development Administration (ODA)) have been effective in turning the LFA to their advantage. 'The assumptions column in particular gives social analysts a legitimised, bureaucratised, officially compulsory channel by which to question others and present their own insights'. INTRAC (1994) are positively effusive, describing the LFA as assisting to promote a 'genuinely local dynamic of learning, exchange and organisation which could lead to a process of people driven development'. A warning note is sounded by work on the changing nature of UK-based NGOs as their activities have become, under the influence of funding pressures, more closely allied to donor strategies and accountability requirements (Wallace *et al.* 1997). This suggests that the routine use of LFA as part of 'the new professionalism' demanded by funders may be reducing NGO commitment to participation, institutional capacity-building and gender-equity. Even so, many of the NGOs studied also appeared to accept that there were valid arguments for improved monitoring of the cost-effectiveness of their activities.

The LFA was introduced as a management tool, designed to increase accountability and central control by imposing 'hierarchically ordered and quantified objectives' (Gasper 1997: 1). Those objectives are often explicitly expressed as targets such as '70 per cent of children immunised', '90 per cent of girl children attending school'. Criticism of the LFA has largely centred on its alleged rigidity in the context of what may well be a rapidly changing social and economic situation, and for what is often characterised as a narrow and simplistic approach to development projects which such target-setting

might seem to imply. Some agencies, particularly DFID, have responded by moving to so-called 'process' log frames, which can be modified during project or programme implementation, and encouraging the use of qualitative indicators, for example, evidence that community meetings have been held or local planning documents prepared.

The main concern here is that the ordered world of the logical framework, which may indeed be extremely useful for the limited task of clarifying inputs, outputs, objectives and aspirations, should not be confused with the much more complex, highly politicised and extremely fluid environment which characterises many social development programmes. In the former, the definition of valid, cost-effective and reliable OVIs may appear relatively straightforward. Sources of data may be 'limited', technical capacity may need 'strengthening', relationships between indicator and underlying variable of concern may be 'tentative', but such problems can usually be overcome by introducing additional project information systems, improving existing record-keeping procedures and the ubiquitous 'training'.

In the real world, information quality depends crucially on the genuine commitment of individuals and/or the existence of effective supervisory procedures. Typically, particularly in regions where the majority of the poor live, the information usually desired for social sector programme monitoring and evaluation is generally regarded as at best of no value and at worst threatening, where it might be used to identify either failure to perform designated tasks or illicit or corrupt behaviour. Countering such attitudes, or establishing systems which can generate reliable information in spite of them, may be a more challenging task than that involved in the implementation of the substantive programme elements. The poorest households are usually not to be found living in areas which have highly effective and efficient local governments or community organisations. Presented with the opportunity of taking part in a funded programme, such organisations will usually be very willing to agree to any proposed information generating or related training activities. They will happily take part in 'participatory' exercises to 'collaboratively' design information systems that meet the funder's requirements. However, experience suggests that such enthusiasm

will typically not be long sustained in the absence of a long-term commitment in terms of external support and supervision.

The model of the world reflected in the logical frame for a project or programme is derived by procedures which will almost certainly include an activity which is referred to by DFID as 'social assessment'. The relationship between that model and 'the real world' will thus depend in large part on the methodologies employed to undertake that assessment and the skill with which they are applied.

4 Social Assessments

Clearly, the need to analyse social factors which may influence a project continues throughout the entire life of that project. However, most agencies see social assessment as making its most important contribution in the design phase. 'The most crucial of these stages occurs during the preparation of the feasibility study. If the feasibility study consultants *thoroughly examine all relevant social dimensions*, it is relatively easy for Bank staff ... to incorporate social dimensions into the project and thereby help ensure a high quality of project design' (ADB 1994: 1).

Donor agency expectations for social assessments, be they at the stage of design, appraisal or implementation, appear extremely high, and a wide range of expertise is demanded of those who undertake them. As indicated above, assessments are expected to involve aspects of disciplines which include anthropology, sociology, political science, and human geography. They are intended to promote an understanding of 'how people and groups understand, order and value their social relationships and systems of social organisation' and the 'complex, contextual nature of local social issues' (DFID 1995a: 4). They should draw out 'the implications of change from the perspectives of the people involved in the process' and convert the 'understanding of complex social reality into appropriate conclusions and recommendations suitable for action'. To add to the daunting nature of the task, 'There is no blueprint for a social annex, due to great variation in the social contexts which attends DFID's projects and programmes' (DFID 1998: 4).

While the theory of social assessment may seem to demand multidisciplinary teams of exceptionally gifted individuals working over an extended period, the reality is usually somewhat more prosaic. Even for reasonably large social development projects, the resources available for the design phase, of which social assessment is only one component, probably imply that, at best, it will be undertaken by one or two reasonably competent and experienced people over the course of a two to three week visit to the project area. The relatively brief time typically allocated to the activity brings to mind the long established adage in development circles that a visit of one week allows the production of a monograph, one month a short paper but it takes a year to learn that one knows nothing. The risk of assuming, particularly if contracted to do so, that one really understands the 'complex, contextual nature of local social issues' within a few weeks may be hard to avoid.

The difficulties may be compounded if the intended beneficiaries of the programme collude in the process, as might reasonably be expected, encouraging the perception of a version of reality favourable to implementation. Indeed, the implicit positivist paradigm which seems to underlie the social assessment process as described by donor agencies, apparently assuming that the assessment will not distort the social reality which it seeks to comprehend, seems curiously at odds with accepted social research methodology.

As might be expected, given the diversity of disciplines deemed relevant to the activity, the methods advocated for conducting social assessments are highly eclectic, covering the range from sample surveys through a wide variety of qualitative methods, with an emphasis on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, to rapid appraisal and participatory exercises. It seems probable that many agencies would regard the key requirement for the task as being general intelligence and experience. The suggestion in a recent book by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Geertz 2000), that a major strength of that discipline was an absence of clearly specified research methods, might well find favour. One particular method stands out as apparently central to the process, partly because of its direct links to the LFA: that of stakeholder analysis.

Table 2

Step 1	Define the higher objectives of the project (LFA goal and purposes)
Step 2	List all primary stakeholders: intended beneficiaries List all secondary stakeholders: other parties involved in the delivery of the project List all external stakeholders: other interested parties including government departments and other donors
Step 3	Determine the 'stakes' of the different groups, both positive and negative
Step 4	For each stakeholder decide: the importance of taking account of their interests in meeting project objectives their capacity to influence the direction and outcomes of the project
Step 5	Assess if changes in project design are required: to achieve objectives in relation to primary stakeholders to take account of the indifferent or negative influences of important parties
Step 6	Consider which stakeholder interests should be allowed for during different stages of the project and how this can be done

Derived from MacArthur (1997a: 263–4)

5 Stakeholder Analysis

As indicated above, the World Bank first used the concept of stakeholder in 1993 and discussed stakeholder analysis in the Participation Sourcebook. In DFID, stakeholder analysis has been mainly confined to discussions of the social analysis of projects. As defined by MacArthur (1997a), the analysis involves six basic procedures (Table 2).

In this form, stakeholder analysis thus consists primarily of developing a checklist of all those who have some involvement or other interest in the project or programme, together with an assessment of the nature and degree of that interest and the potential they have to influence the project outcomes. It is linked to the LFA in three respects: goal and purpose objectives are used to determine the stakeholders; goal and purpose indicators should reflect the interests of different primary stakeholders; and stakeholder assessments may affect the assumptions column. It is also closely linked to the participation agenda now adopted by most agencies. Different groups of stakeholder are seen as having specific roles in participatory activities relating to different stages of the project cycle, for example, identification, planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

Clearly, stakeholder analysis might be regarded as simply the formalisation of procedures which a

good social analyst would undertake as a matter of course. However, codification, checklists and step-by-step protocols often have an important role to play in increasing the quality of social research. They can improve both the consistency and transparency of fieldwork, and ensure that the field researcher who is simply competent, as opposed to inspired, can still deliver the required product. The simple requirement of being forced to consider explicitly the 'interests, characteristics and circumstances' (MacArthur 1997b: 14) of all those involved, directly or indirectly, in project related activities, is in itself a useful discipline and one which may lead to new insights into potential constraints or opportunities.

The process will necessarily be somewhat simplistic in its view of the complex reality described above. As with any other modelling exercise, the aim will be to capture the essential features of that reality in as parsimonious a fashion as possible. In practice the balance is hard to determine. The DFID guidance notes (DFID 1995b), for example, suggest that primary stakeholders, those ultimately affected by the project, should be classified by gender, social or income class, and occupational or service user groups. At a minimum, this would determine eight primary stakeholder categories. However, when confronting a real target population, any conscientious attempt to ascribe interests to such broad categories will usually appear highly unsatisfactory. It may be impossible to avoid further breakdowns by

such variables as age, location, household size, etc. A similar situation arises with secondary stakeholders, those involved in project delivery. In a rural primary health care project, for example, a multiplicity of public and private providers in different types of facility, with different levels of seniority, working in peri-urban or isolated rural areas, may need to be identified to conduct a realistic assessment of interests and influence. It is clearly very easy to generate what might still seem to be a basic list of stakeholders which is far longer than one could reasonably attempt to analyse.

An additional layer of complexity, not currently addressed by stakeholder analysis, arises because projects and programmes not only create stakeholders but opportunities for alliances between stakeholders. To give a simple example, control over drug stocks allocated to participating villages in a recent project was divided between the head of the district health committee and the local facility nurse, with the aim of ensuring financial probity. Within the framework of the project, the village committee head was seen as representing the interests of the beneficiaries, and was expected to play a supervisory role over the provider. In some villages, however, it was clear to these individuals that by joining forces they gained complete control over the principle project resource. From the project perspective, this was simple corruption. From the perspective of the individuals, their roles as defined by the project were clearly in conflict with their roles as defined by themselves: poor rural individuals attempting to feed their families by taking advantage of such an obvious opportunity.

From the above, a cautious attitude might be seen as appropriate in terms of the possibilities for conducting a detailed, reasonably comprehensive and robust stakeholder analysis with the resources and time typically allocated to this aspect of project and programme design. At the very least it should be regarded as a 'work-in-progress', to be routinely updated as new evidence and situations emerge. There remains the issue as to who should conduct the exercise. As indicated above, within the World Bank, stakeholder analysis was developed within the broad context of moves towards a participatory approach to the development process. Can stakeholder analysis be undertaken in a participatory manner? The DFID guidelines of 1995 seem

doubtful on this issue; 'stakeholder analysis involves sensitive and undiplomatic information. Many interests are covert, and agendas are partially hidden. In many situations there will be few benefits in trying to uncover such agendas in public'. Such a position clearly places great reliance on those few individuals, perhaps external consultants, who are empowered to conduct the analysis. It might seem appropriate to question the extent to which they are capable, within the constraints of the assessment process, of uncovering the 'sensitive and undiplomatic information', exposing the 'covert interests' and determining the 'hidden agendas' of a large number and variety of stakeholder groups, when they cannot possibly encounter more than a tiny sample of individual members. More provocatively, it raises the question as to who should apply these investigative techniques to one of the key secondary stakeholders – the donor agency.

6 Participatory Methodology

Underlying much of the above discussion of changing donor approaches is what has become the core agenda of 'participation'. As indicated above, participatory development is defined by the DAC to be a desired objective in its own right. The apparent progress of participatory approaches in general has been remarkable: 'once a shout from the radical fringe, the call for participation has resurfaced as a dominant voice in development thinking' (da Cunha and Pena 1997: 1). Of particular relevance here, participation has also become a widely accepted and even a required methodological approach within the donor community. For example, whereas in the past those implementing projects were exhorted to provide 'hard evidence' of performance, usually in the form of quantitative indicators derived from statistical analysis of administrative data or sample surveys, donors are now equally likely to demand participatory studies undertaken in collaboration with intended beneficiaries.

In terms of what is now regarded as the primary development objective, poverty reduction, both the Bank and DFID have been prime movers in what has become the widespread use of participatory poverty assessments (PPAs). Donors encourage the use of PPAs by developing partner countries as 'an instrument for including the perspectives of poor

people in the analysis of poverty and the formulation of strategies to reduce it' (World Bank 1996). They are seen as having potential influence on the allocation of resources between sectors, areas and social groups; access, quality and relevance of services for poor people; and regulatory frameworks (informal sector, land, housing tenure, etc.).

A later version of this article will consider the current and potential role of participatory methodology in social analysis. Here, it will simply be noted that the remarkable success they have achieved in winning support has in some respects created a considerable dilemma for those who originated, nurtured and promoted the participatory approach. On the one hand, they are clearly extremely concerned at the widespread abuse of the label by those who have selectively adopted some of the most popular methods (or publicised the finding of participatory studies where these have coincided with their preferred stance on social development issues), but appear to have no real understanding of or concern for the methodology or underlying paradigm. On the other hand, attempting to 'lay down the law' as to how participatory activities should be undertaken, or requiring that they should only be carried out by those who have been 'certified' by a recognised 'expert group' might be interpreted as following precisely the professionalisation route which the originators of the approach were specifically attempting to avoid (Chambers 1993). Is it possible to conceive of an intellectually rigorous participatory methodology or is any attempt to construct such a methodology essentially self-defeating?

7 Quantitative Methodology and Social Development

Information for programme and project design, implementation and evaluation will largely be derived using what can broadly be described as qualitative methods, which may cover a wide range of activities including the (very) rapid appraisal typically associated with short-term consultancy visits, sociological or even anthropological studies and participatory exercises. Quantitative methodology will in general play a supporting role, providing key statistical estimates and simple indicative models of relationships, usually in the form of tabulations, graphs and the occasional simple regression. Here

also, there appears to be a worrying tendency to overestimate the reliability and robustness of such information and to accept at face value the validity of relationships which may be extremely tenuous. Three particular concerns will be raised.

The first relates to the quality of quantitative social data in many countries. This is not the appropriate place for a lengthy discussion of this perennial issue (Lucas 1994), but three simple points are perhaps worth noting. First, it is not unusual to find that apparently very basic social data does not exist or is so poor as to be unusable. Not only may there be no current reliable information on the number on pupils in school in some areas, but the number of teachers and even the number of schools may be highly speculative. On a recent visit by the author to a state ministry of health, the latest notifiable disease statistics available were for 1993 and were clearly not worth the effort of analysis. Second, data quality is probably inversely related to social needs. In general, poorer countries, and poorer regions within countries, tend to have both higher levels of need and the most difficulty in establishing and maintaining reliable data systems, reflecting a combination of lack of resources, low administrative capacity, corruption, etc. Focusing on poverty can thus greatly increase the difficulties involved in deriving useful information. Third, in many countries basic data on sub-national population sizes and age/sex compositions are both uncertain and subject to large variation over time, particularly in poorer areas where migration patterns strongly reflect relative income earning opportunities for different population groups. Many per capita social indicators, for example, morbidity, mortality, enrolment and benefit take-up rates, which play a key role in many social development projects, are sensitive to such uncertainties.

The second, related, concern is that limitations on data quality are typically greatly underplayed. Once indicators have been selected as being the most appropriate for the task in hand there are clearly strong incentives to make often untestable (and therefore unchallengeable) assumptions as to the possibilities for measuring them. To give one interesting current example, there has been a high level of frustration among analysts for many years because the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), which provide the most valuable source of

information on fertility and mortality for many of the poorest countries, contain no explicit data on household income or expenditure. Recently, this frustration appears to have been overcome with the publication of detailed income quintile breakdowns of DHS estimates (World Bank 2000). The income disaggregation is based on a surrogate indicator, derived by applying the multivariate analytical technique of principle components to a series of DHS variables relating to household ownership of some 60–70 assets. Given that the countries involved have no alternative sources of data on this issue, it is perfectly possible that the new estimates will be used as background information to future projects or programmes. Do they reflect the actual situation? A generally agreed response to this question may take many years to emerge. There will certainly be a vigorous debate on the technical issues relating to the derivation of the indicator but if this follows the usual pattern of such debates it will not be resolved. Empirical studies will undoubtedly be undertaken, some of which will reinforce and some contradict the original findings. Meanwhile the estimates will almost certainly steadily infiltrate the development literature and acquire the status of 'facts'.

The third concern relates to what appears to be a common trend followed by debates involving the quantitative analysis of social policy issues. This can perhaps be illustrated by reference to the current, ongoing, discussion on the question which was set out in a recent IMF paper as 'Does higher government spending buy better results in education and health care?' (IMF 1999). The starting point for such debates is typically a cross-sectional analysis, usually employing some variant of the regression model, with social outcomes in a selection of countries correlated against a hypothesised determining variable, in this case a measure of public spending. Using such an approach, Filmer and Pritchett conclude that 'the impact of public spending on health is quite small...independent variation in public spending explains less than one-seventh of 1% of the observed differences in mortality across countries ... actual public spending per child death averted is \$50,000–100,000' (1999: 1309).

The force of such statements is evident and reinforced by the fact that the final comment is expressed explicitly in cost-effectiveness terms, as might be expected in a programme or project con-

text. Can they be taken at face value? Do they imply that programmes which encourage governments to increase their health care expenditures are a waste of time? Many have certainly used the paper as evidence to draw the latter conclusion. As with the previous example, there are many technical arguments which could be entered into concerning the validity of the findings, though it is clear that great care and expertise were applied to the study. The public spending data used in the exercise, for example, are not readily available for many of the countries considered and the study is based on an earlier exercise which generated plausible estimates. The precise form of the equations estimated and other explanatory variables included can certainly be questioned. In interpreting the findings, the phrases 'independent variation' and 'explains' are technical terms which do not readily translate into policy statements; moving from cross-sectional correlations to causal relationships should always be regarded as a step to be taken only with the greatest caution.

However, such discussions seem to miss the main point. The findings are now in the public domain and have been widely quoted. They have found particular favour among those individuals who have no capacity to assess the technical quality of the study, but are predisposed to draw the above conclusions as to the ineffectiveness of public services. The terms of the debate have been set down and later contributions (e.g. Filmer *et al.* 1997; Enemark and Schleimann 1999), which explore the underlying issues in ways which may be much more relevant in terms of public policy, become to some extent simply elaborations on the central theme.

This is not to raise objections to this type of modelling exercise as such. One function of social policy research is to explore the relationships between key policy variables. The estimation of regression models using cross-sectional data is one, perfectly legitimate if relatively simplistic, approach to this task. The issue is that such models often seem to gain a status within the social policy arena which far exceeds that which is warranted, presumably because they appear to provide simple answers to apparently simple but important questions. In practice, because of their high level of abstraction, they are usually of limited value in terms of the much more difficult task of designing social provision

models which will work in the messy political environment described above.

8 Conclusion

The intention of this article was to provide a basis for discussion within the IDS Social Policy Programme on issues which will need to be addressed as the social policy analysis manual is developed. It has therefore focused very much on the possible problems and limitations of existing methodologies and methods. There is of course another side. Social development issues are now taken much more seriously within donor agencies, sometimes in spite of the tensions which this approach may create with *their* funders. There are active debates on the LFA and stakeholder analysis, within both the academic and donor communities, that are influencing the design and implementation of programmes and projects. However the current debates around the future of participatory methodology are resolved, there is no possibility that the cavalier attitudes often adopted in the past towards intended project beneficiaries will re-emerge. There have thus been considerable gains over the last decade, the theme of this article is simply that there is a long way to go.

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